

"THE CHARLATAN OF THE GULF ISLANDS":
BROTHER XII AND PROGRESSIVE OCCULT DISCOURSE
IN THE HISTORY OF BRITISH COLUMBIA

by

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B.A., The University of California at Berkeley, 1995

A THESIS SUBMITTED IN PARTIAL FULFILLMENT OF
THE REQUIREMENTS FOR THE DEGREE OF

MASTER OF ARTS

in

THE FACULTY OF GRADUATE STUDIES

(History)

THE UNIVERSITY OF BRITISH COLUMBIA

January 2007

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Abstract

The post-war 1920s and 30s were decades of uncertainty in the world, where a resurgence of popular interest in mysticism, magic and other “occult” spiritual practices coincided with the growth of extreme political movements. Between 1927 and 1933, a man known as Brother XII ran a notorious spiritual commune in southern British Columbia, which he identified as the spiritual center of the world. Believing that the destruction of human civilization was immanent, Brother XII claimed that he would shield the survivors and foster a New Age of enlightenment. However, his community soon dissolved amidst sexual and financial scandal, which the popular press eagerly documented. The story of Brother XII has dramatic appeal but also offers insights to scholars of BC history.

Whether he knew it or not, in exhorting a group of world-weary spiritual idealists to retreat to the remote wilds of Vancouver Island, Brother XII -- otherwise known as Edward Arthur Wilson -- was re-articulating a well-worn pattern of intersecting spiritual and political utopianism projected onto community life in British Columbia. In fact, underlying Wilson’s dream of a new world was his own radical critique of mainstream society, which was founded on the progressive, occult tradition of theosophy. Wilson’s ideals supported extremes of vision. On one hand these included an egalitarian ideal of gender equity and sexual freedom, and on the other, a proto-fascist, anti-Semitic diatribe. Wilson’s preoccupation with sex and race also echoed themes that shaped the history of British Columbia, where socially transgressive behavior could exist unchecked, and racial hierarchies were a defining feature of everyday life.

This study of Brother XII contributes to a growing body of historical scholarship that is re-assessing the significance of nineteenth- and twentieth-century alternative spiritual movements and arguing for their centrality to the project of modernity. It also argues that the man that has been long dismissed as a kooky footnote in the history of BC actually reveals something important about the intersection of the political and the spiritual in the early twentieth-century world of British Columbia.

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Acknowledgements

This thesis has been a long time in coming, and I would like to thank my advisor, Joy Dixon, for her patience and encouragement. I would also like to thank Bob McDonald for his important input in the last stages of the drafting of this thesis. Thank you to both of them for their timely support at the end of a very long haul. My receipt of their final grade in the last week of the 2006 Fall term was the best Christmas present I could have asked for.

I would like to thank the Department of History at UBC for a rewarding experience overall. I would especially like to thank faculty members Anne Gorsuch and Bob Brain for their warmth and support, as well as my two TA advisors, Colin Green and Arlene Sindelar, for their mentorship. My graduate experience at UBC would not have been the same without the friendship of my fellow students Teri Chettiar and Andrew King.

This project was inspired by Justine Brown's evocative exploration of British Columbia's utopian history, *All Possible Worlds*. So, thank you to my mother for introducing me to Justine's work as well as for imbuing me with her own belief in our collective human potential for inner growth and transformation. And thanks to my father for passing his love of history on to me in the first place. Finally, thanks to all of my longtime friends -- Melanie, Shelley, Shannon, Jessica, Carolina and Blanca -- for believing that I really would finish my thesis and for being such a great support along the way.

"The Charlatan of the Gulf Islands"

On October 27, 1928, a provocative headline appeared on the front page of the *Vancouver Daily Province*, British Columbia's top-selling newspaper. Written by popular columnist Bruce A. McKelvie, it proclaimed, "Weird Occultism Exemplified In Amazing Colony at Cedar-by-Sea,"¹ and offered readers their first glimpse of a strange new phenomenon that had been brewing in their midst: a cult on Vancouver Island led by a man who called himself "the Brother, XII". This was the first of many articles McKelvie wrote about the man who became popularly known as Brother XII, and his Aquarian Foundation, and in promising "revelations that will startle the public," the author established a tone that would characterize public perceptions of "this extraordinary movement" throughout its brief existence on British Columbia's southern coast – and the legends that outlived it. That tone was a mixture of scandal, menace and derision, which McKelvie highlighted in his introductory portrait by contrasting the prosaic with the exotic and juxtaposing in his readers' minds the familiarity of a "pretty Vancouver Island village" like Cedar-By-Sea, the small settlement near Nanaimo that Brother XII and his followers had established, against the strangeness of their "weird occult doctrines,"² with all of the overtones of sexual and spiritual transgression that this conveyed. Explaining that the Aquarian Foundation and its members were seeking to escape the corruption of the larger world and create an ideal "Center of Safety,"³ where a newly enlightened generation of souls could be nurtured and a "New Age" in global consciousness thereby established, McKelvie revealed a conflict between this idealistic intention and its supposedly sordid execution. Indeed, according to McKelvie, the shocking truth about the colony at Cedar-By-Sea was that, for all the pristine beauty of its surroundings – and "[n]o more idealistic location for a settlement could well be imagined than that of the Aquarian Foundation at Cedar [with its] [t]wo hundred acres of pleasant groves and delightful copses, exquisite...in the florid colorings of autumn" – its true function was to promote indecent moral and sexual practices, defined as the "mingling of

* Title quote "Charlatan of the Gulf Islands" is from Will Dawson, "Brother Twelve: Charlatan of the Gulf Islands," *BC Outdoors*, July 1978, 20-23.

¹ Bruce McKelvie, "Weird Occultism Exemplified In Amazing Colony at Cedar-By-Sea," *Vancouver Daily Province*, 28 October, 1928, 1.

² McKelvie, "Weird Occultism...", 1.

³ McKelvie, 34.

the sexes under plea of spiritual duty and in defiance of recognized marriage laws.”⁴ Cedar-By-Sea may have resembled the Garden of Eden, but for McKelvie its innocence was already corrupted, and although his journalistic duty (and flair for controversy) propelled him to reveal what he saw as the obscene and heretical practices of these “students of the occult,” he also took pains to distance himself and his readers, like “the tolerant people of Nanaimo,” from these same occultists, who, being “mostly from California,”⁵ were therefore quite unlike decent British Columbians. McKelvie’s message was clear: these people don’t belong here and they are not part of us. But were Brother XII and his Aquarian Foundation such an anomaly in British Columbia, and were he and his colonists actually responsible for - in the words of a *Victoria Daily Colonist* newspaper article written nearly thirty years later - “such goings on as had never been seen before or since on the island”?⁶ Perhaps, as much evidence suggests, Brother XII and his Colony of Truth are neither aberrant nor unique in the history of British Columbia, but instead, form part of a radical sub-culture that is intrinsic to Canada’s most westward province, a sub-culture that perfectly suited the needs of a man like Brother XII, and one that, however much disavowed by the dominant society, persisted as its shadow image.

There are two opposing popular visions of British Columbia: one as a respectable outpost of British (as opposed to American) civilization and the other as an isolated refuge for an assortment of idealists, cranks or just plain crooks. The disparity between these two visions is itself characteristic of a province whose identity, whether in terms of its racial divide, its political extremes or the stark metropolis-hinterland cleavage in its population, has historically been polarized.⁷ Long the home of native peoples, British Columbia was settled late in the race for European imperialist conquests, when Vancouver Island was claimed as a British colony in 1849, and continuing in 1858, when

⁴ McKelvie, “Weird Occultism...,” 1.

⁵ Ibid.

⁶ Gwen Cash, “Bridey Murphy Case Recalls Brother XII,” *Daily Colonist*, 26 February, 1956, 2.

⁷ Jean Barman, *The West Beyond the West: A History of British Columbia* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1996), 343. British Columbia has historically been polarized between a radical left and a conservative right, with little middle ground in between. According to Barman’s study, BC’s economy, which has been based on staples and mostly devoid of an autonomous middle sector, is the source of this polarization.

the mainland followed suit.⁸ Indeed, its conflicted identity and tense politics perhaps betray the newness of a territory whose aboriginal and settler populations are still marked by the discordant legacy of colonialism. At the same time, for much of the province's short history - from the mid-nineteenth-century colonial period to the early years of Confederation to the First World War to the volatile interwar years that witnessed Brother XII's utopian experiment - the *Britishness* its very name lays claim to was unequivocally championed by British Columbia's dominant settler society. Already by 1859, the ruling minority of British settlers (who consisted mostly of employees of the London-based Hudson's Bay Company) in the colony of Vancouver Island had recreated the political and cultural institutions of their homeland, and the capital city, Victoria, had become "as civilized as any respectable village in England."⁹ And, despite the 1871 transformation of the two colonies (after their union in 1866) into the Canadian province of British Columbia, this new province remained firmly under the control of its inhabitants of British origin.¹⁰ It was these *British* British Columbians who maintained their "domination [over] political, legal and social structures" from their capital city on Vancouver Island and simply disregarded the interests of other inhabitants of the province - and even the distant "entity known as Canada."¹¹ Not even growing immigration from the rest of Canada as well as from Britain, which raised British Columbia's population to over half a million by 1921, changed the overall balance of both social and political power in the province.¹² For, despite a short period after the completion of the trans-Canada railway in 1901 when the number of Canadian newcomers to British Columbia outnumbered the number that of new British settlers, by the outbreak of the First World War the majority of settlers in the province came once again from Britain or its colonial possessions. These British arrivals, who were generally

⁸ Barman, 69. British Columbia had already endured a century of maritime exploitation by European and American fur traders by the time the London-based Hudson's Bay Company established its monopoly over the territory in 1820. For the next thirty-eight years, until Vancouver Island and then the Mainland were declared British colonies, a small number of mostly British employees of the Hudson's Bay Company, as well as some Americans, were the primary non-natives to settle in the territory.

⁹ Barman, 58.

¹⁰ British Columbia's entrance into Canadian Confederation was carried out against the wishes of many colonists who resisted it and preferred to remain British subjects or, even, to join the United States.

¹¹ Barman, 99.

¹² Barman, 129.

a wealthier group of people than the mostly Canadian and American immigrants who settled the prairie provinces, significantly influenced the culture of their adopted home. Indeed, of the 175,000 British settlers who had arrived in British Columbia by the end of the province's immigration boom in 1914, 25,000 of these were middle-class and carried with them values and beliefs that maintained a hierarchical social structure and reinforced social and economic divisions from the top down, all of which perpetuated the overall dominance of British cultural attitudes on the province, and contributed a lasting tendency for British Columbia to see itself as somewhat separate from Canada.¹³

And yet, beyond the influx of British or British-identified settlement in British Columbia, there existed a separate, much less visible world of foreign settlers who were either, like the Chinese, excluded from the dominant society, or, like the continental Europeans who came in pursuit of a political or religious communitarian ideal, set themselves off by choice in their desire for an isolated way of life. Within this latter group, Scandinavians, like the Norwegians whose settlement at Bella Coola survived, or the Danes and the Finns whose colonies at Cape Scott and on Malcom Island did not,¹⁴ were motivated by a radical social idealism. Christian sectarian movements, like the Mennonite and Doukhobor groups that came out of Russia, were drawn to the province by a millennialist religious impulse that propelled them to establish remote communities where they could practice their faith undisturbed.¹⁵ In all cases, these late-nineteenth-century arrivals to British Columbia avoided contact with the host society. Indeed, the province, with its isolating, mountain-bound geography and its location, literally and figuratively at the end of the line, exercised continued appeal to individuals and groups who wanted to separate themselves from the world.¹⁶ As Canadian historian Jean Barman notes, for many of these disparate communities that were unexpectedly thrown

¹³ Barman, 138 -141. By 1921, 60 percent of BC's settlers came from Britain or its colonial possessions. Also, British influences in early twentieth-century BC included left-side driving rules, the establishment of a BC regional accent and led to the British practice of distinguishing between BC and the rest of Canada.

¹⁴ Barman, 136.

¹⁵ Anthony W. Rasporich, "Utopia, Sect and Millenium in Western Canada 1870 – 1940," in *Prophets, Priests, and Prodigals: Readings in Canadian Religious History 1608 to Present*, ed. Mark G. McGowan et al. (Toronto: McGraw-Hill Ryerson Ltd., 1992), 218.

¹⁶ Justine Brown, *All Possible Worlds: Utopian Experiments in British Columbia* (Vancouver: New Star Books, 2000), 52. Brown notes the nineteenth-century arrival of these groups to BC. On page 137 of her book, Barman notes their desire to separate themselves from the world.

together in a common geographical space, the combination of their commitment to their old ways and the exclusionary discrimination¹⁷ of the dominant society made it possible “to live in BC without becoming part of BC,” a circumstance which rendered the place known as British Columbia “largely a political abstraction” that lacked a truly cohesive identity.¹⁸

It was precisely this quality as a non-place that enabled British Columbia to be imagined as any place, and this made it a perfect locale for the expression of a radical, utopian experimentalism that took many forms. In her history of BC’s utopian or intentional communities, *All Possible Worlds*, Justine Brown reminds us that it was through uniting two words, *eutopos* (a good place) and *outopos* (no place), that Sir Thomas Moore long ago coined the term “utopia,” and that these two words convey the concept of utopia as an ideal that is both limitless in potential and impossible in execution. Indeed, though many sources trace the link between BC and dreams of utopia, just as many recount the shattering of those dreams. According to BC author Jack Hodgins’ 1994 novel *The Invention of the World*, which fictionalized the Brother XII story from the establishment of his Aquarian Foundation in 1927 to its dissolution after the Brother’s mysterious disappearance in 1933, British Columbia and especially Vancouver Island is “littered with failed utopias.”¹⁹ And anyone familiar with the rest of BC’s coastal islands knows that they, too, are replete with examples of utopian experiments, few of which have survived. These begin as early as 1862 with Melakatla, a Europeanized Indian village that was founded on BC’s northwest coast by Englishman William Duncan, an Anglican lay minister and “self-appointed savior of Tsimshian.”²⁰ This tendency extended into other more recent intentional communities such as a Spanish polygamous group that established itself on Mayne Island in the 1980s, or the Community Education and Economic Development Society (CEEDS), which continues to exist in British Columbia’s interior. In between, Canadian historians such as Anthony

¹⁷ Barman, 150. Some arrivals, like the Chinese, Doukhobors, Mennonites, and middle-class Britons, tried to maintain the old ways. The Britons largely succeeded.

¹⁸ Barman, 145. “For Doukhobors and Mennonites, it was long possible to live in BC without becoming part of BC.” Indeed, Barman argues that the creation of British Columbia as a unified whole did not take place until after World War Two.

¹⁹ Jack Hodgins. *The Invention of the World* (Toronto: McClelland & Stewart, 1994), 32.

²⁰ Brown, 15.

Rasporich and Brown have recorded the many late-nineteenth-century ethnic-nationalist and communitarian settlements that were established in British Columbia.²¹ Most importantly, utopian communities, as Brown argues, express a radical idealism that always implies a critique of the larger society. Whether seeking an isolated refuge or a pastoral paradise, these communities in British Columbia attempted to challenge and revise mainstream views of social organization.²²

This desire to challenge mainstream views does seem to have been one of the primary motivations of Brother XII, who, in the tradition of esoteric thought, issued radical critiques of his culture, characterizing it as irredeemable and unworthy of his wholehearted participation. In fact, as peculiar as he may have appeared to his fellow British Columbians, Brother XII was neither a lone seer nor an isolated aberration, but instead articulated notions found in a worldwide spiritual movement known as theosophy, whose roots in the occult tradition nourished its own radical, progressivist critique of mainstream society. Indeed, this and other reform-minded movements attracted adherents all along the West Coast of North America, linking coastal British Columbia's utopian leanings to those existing in California, and contributing thereby to the notion of the Left Coast, or, to use a term popularized by Joel Garreau's *Nine Nations of North America*, ecotopia. This projected onto BC, as onto California, its reputation as the last "haven for the unorthodox"²³ and it left British Columbians with two directional axes from which to derive their cultural identity and allegiances. One moved eastward across the continent toward the older, established settlements of Eastern Canada -- towards which many members of British Columbia's *British* establishment felt defensive and antagonistic. The other moved along the west coast into California, which was viewed by theosophists and other spiritual reformers as the "foreordained site of a splendid new

²¹ Anthony W. Rasporich, "Utopian ideals and Community Settlements in Western Canada 1880-1914," in *The Canadian West: Social Change and Economic Development*, ed. Henry C. Klassen. (Calgary: University of Calgary Comprint Publishing Company, 1977), 38. For his part, Rasporich, views utopian experiments as a "necessary pastoral phase in the pioneer development of the Canadian West" because a moral projection of a new order was a continuing theme in early Western Canada. In *All Possible Worlds* on page 14, Brown identifies the peak of the first utopian wave in British Columbia as occurring during the inter-war period. This coincides with years of Brother XII's short-lived Aquarian Foundation, while the second wave peaked in 1975 following the establishment of a multitude of 1960s-inspired communes.

²² Brown, 24.

²³ Michael Ashcraft, *The Dawn of the New Cycle: Point Loma Theosophists and American Culture* (Knoxville: The University of Tennessee Press, 2002), 54.

civilization that would surpass all others” and bring to life “fervent hopes for a recovery of human potential lost with Eden.”²⁴ Although he initially embraced ideals that appealed to theosophists, whether in Britain, Canada or the United States, Brother XII took these as merely the starting point for a vision whose realization would prove shocking both to theosophists and ordinary British Columbians despite its stated commitment to the era’s collective ideals.

Before 1926, when an Englishman named E.A. Wilson published a small pamphlet in London entitled “A Message from the Masters of Wisdom in 1926” and announced that the Masters, an “other-worldly brotherhood that guided humanity’s destiny,”²⁵ were once again about to do some Work in the world, no one had heard of the man who would become known as Brother XII. Most people in Britain, however, and many beyond, had heard of Madame Blavatsky, the enigmatic founder (along with Henry Steel Olcott) in 1875 of the Theosophical Society and the popularizer of both the term *theosophy*, or “divine wisdom”, and its fundamental belief in “the existence of specially initiated adepts, or of secret documents that h[o]ld, in coded signs and symbols, the key to understanding nature’s deepest enigmas.”²⁶ Blavatsky, whose Theosophical Society (TS) offered adherents a path to spiritual knowledge and a key to unlocking the hidden secrets of the universe, also made famous two Masters whom she identified as the teachers guiding her own studies and her writing of the founding texts of the Theosophical Society, *Isis Unveiled* and *The Secret Doctrine*, which communicated all of the Ancient Wisdom in modern form. These two Masters, or adepts, were not supernatural beings, she explained, but men who were highly evolved and advanced “morally, intellectually and spiritually and who belong[ed] to a Brotherhood (of the Great White Lodge) [that] preserv[ed] the Wisdom of the Ages and guid[ed] the evolution of Humanity.”²⁷ By claiming to have received his own version of the Masters’ teachings, which purported to renew the world in the spirit of Brotherhood and foster a new “race”

²⁴ Justine Brown, *Hollywood Utopia* (Vancouver: New Star Books, 2002), 57. In fact, the West Coast of California with its mild climate remained unique because its Anglo-Protestant minority competed with other religious groups rather than determining mainstream culture, all of which left ample room for social and cultural experiments.

²⁵ Andrew Scott, *The Promise of Paradise: Utopian Communities in BC* (Vancouver: White Cap Books, 1997), 144.

²⁶ Scott, *The Promise of Paradise*, 144.

²⁷ James A. Santucci, “The Aquarian Foundation,” *Communal Societies*, 9 (1989): 39.

of people to populate that world, Wilson was announcing his status as an initiate of the Great White Lodge²⁸ and placing himself squarely in the Theosophical tradition of Blavatsky and her followers. For an unknown, middle-aged Englishman, this tradition went far toward legitimizing his self-proclaimed role as prophet of the New Age.

In fact, Madame Blavatsky's Theosophical Society was itself an updated and organized version of a pre-existing wisdom practice, the Western esoteric or occult tradition that stretched back to the philosophy of the pre-Socratics and incorporated the cabalist, neo-platonic and Hermetic strands of Western philosophic and religious thought.²⁹ The term *occult* refers to things hidden and because of the occult nature of the divine wisdom her Society was imparting, Blavatsky placed great emphasis on the secretive element of her work, and claimed that this hidden knowledge was only available to those students who were ready to receive it and who were committed to carefully studying the necessary philosophers and sacred writings from great historical religions.³⁰ And yet, despite the obscurantist slant of most occult concerns, the Theosophical Society attracted a growing membership, which numbered 6,000 adherents by 1886³¹ and reached a peak of 45,000 members worldwide in 1928.³² Therefore, when Wilson published his 1926 pamphlet, the Theosophical Society was near the height of its influence and renown, and his message, that an imminent change in global consciousness would create a new "race" of spiritually enlightened people whose Work "for the welfare of humanity"³³ would include the spiritual training of subsequent generations and the re-formation of the world as a harmonious whole, was, for many of his readers, a recognizable echo of the original ideals of the TS and the radical vision for a new world they presented. These ideals emphasized the individual acquisition of spiritual wisdom

²⁸ Edward Arthur Wilson, *Foundation Letters and Teachings* (Akron, Ohio: Sun Publishing Company, 1927), 5.

²⁹ Janet Oppenheim, *The Other World: Spiritualism and Psychic Research in England 1850-1914* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1985), 163.

³⁰ Santucci, 41. This divine wisdom was believed to have existed "from the dawn of humanity."

³¹ Ann Davis, *The Logic of Ecstasy: Canadian Mystical Painting 1920 – 1940*. (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1992), 96. This was just twenty years after its founding and five years after Blavatsky's death.

³² Jill Roe, *Beyond Belief: Theosophy in Australia 1879 – 1939*. (Kensington: New South Wales University Press 1986), 349. The Society continues to exist to this day, although it was separated into national sections (each containing individual lodges) and divided into competing factions as early as 1895.

³³ Wilson, *Foundation Letters and Techings*, 2.

but were premised on a collective commitment to fostering a culture of Universal Brotherhood that would unite all of humanity in peaceful cooperation. Yet in 1926, forty-five years after its founder's death, the TS itself was anything but united. Instead, the dominant Adyar branch was divided into competing factions, one of which accused the other of forsaking Blavatsky's foundational teachings, which Wilson shrewdly defended.³⁴ Accordingly, his pamphlet affirmed the Universal Brotherhood of man, the cyclical and progressive nature of the universe and its Seven Races, and the existence of highly evolved beings or intermediaries standing between the ultimate and humanity.³⁵ These principles were central to Blavatsky's original teachings, and by offering a reflection of the fundamental theosophical ideals of progress and unity in the spiritual Work described in his pamphlet, Wilson attracted the interest of theosophists who were critical of the divisions within their movement and who found Wilson's return to Blavatsky's original vision appealing.³⁶ This drew followers to his movement and validated both his Aquarian Foundation and the Age of Aquarius that he promised it would foster.³⁷ And so, drawing from the radical vision of a new world that Mme. Blavatsky and her Theosophical Society had introduced in 1875, Brother XII promised that a New Age would be established, this time in the twentieth century and in British Columbia.

In last decade, as religion has become increasingly studied as a category of historical analysis, scholars of history have begun seriously examining popular late-nineteenth and early-twentieth-century spiritual and occult practices. Where previous studies dismissed these as fringe movements operating on the margins of society, more recent scholarship places them at the center of the project of modernity. Indeed, although

³⁴ After 1895, the TS divided into two separate, self-contained branches, the American Theosophical Society and the Theosophical Society –Adyar, and for the purposes of this study, any reference to the Theosophical Society or TS, unless otherwise specified, will imply the numerically and influentially dominant Adyar branch. Today there are four separate Theosophical organizations worldwide. The faction that defended Blavatsky's foundational teachings referred to itself as the "Back-to-Blavatsky" movement.

³⁵ W. Michael Ashcraft, *The Dawn of the New Cycle: Point Loma Theosophists and American Culture* (Knoxville: The University of Tennessee Press, 2002), 5.

³⁶ Ashcraft, 5. Blavatsky's teachings affirmed the following principles: 1. the fundamental unity of all existence; 2. the eternal, cyclical and hierarchical nature of the universe; 3. the progressive evolution of nature; 4. the existence of laws of reincarnation and karma; 5. the evolution of human consciousness through seven Root Races and sub-races; 6. the existence of "a cosmic hierarchy of sentient beings" guiding the universe.

³⁷ Santucci, 41.

Weber's secularization thesis prompted scholars to associate this period with a rise in the prestige of materialist science and a corresponding decline in religious faith, many historians are now acknowledging that it was also a time of increasing popular interest in mysticism, magic and other unorthodox, or even heretical, spiritual practices. In fact, Alex Owen, British historian and author of *The Place of Enchantment: British Occultism and the Culture of the Modern*, has termed this entire spiritual movement the fin de siècle "occult revival."³⁸ Furthermore, many scholars cite Madame Blavatsky's Theosophical Society, itself an outgrowth of the earlier spiritualist movement, as the central movement within this revival. The Theosophical Society rejected dogmatism, whether materialist or religious, and embraced both the spiritual and the modern in a synthesis of eastern and western faiths, championing, in short, a universal, rational religion.

In his popular – and highly critical -- book *Mme. Blavatsky's Baboon*, Peter Washington accounts for the rise of the Theosophical Society and that of the occult movement in general by identifying in the late nineteenth century West, both in Europe and America, societies hungry for religious or spiritual meaning beyond institutional forms of Christianity.³⁹ In particular, people who longed for radical political and social change⁴⁰ were seeking alternate and often exotic faiths that could withstand the challenges posed by the new forces of atheism, materialism, positivist science and biblical scholarship, all of which were weakening the comforting certainties, both social and spiritual, of orthodox Christianity. Owen similarly suggests that the fundamental catalyst of the renewed occult movement was the growing critique in Britain of the Enlightenment project, which was increasingly under attack for its affirmation of rational autonomous subjectivity and its consignment of both magic and religion to the realm of the irrational. This Owen refers to as the nineteenth century "Post-Weberian contradiction" between an increasingly secular framework and an enduring spiritual hunger, and she posits that it was precisely the tension in "the seemingly oppositional

³⁸ Alex Owen, *The Place of Enchantment: British Occultism and the Culture of the Modern* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2004), 120. Owen defines the "occult revival" as a movement in which a mixture of new spiritual movements and secret, magical societies sought to unlock the secrets of the universe through exploring "the interior man."

³⁹ Peter Washington, *Madame Blavatsky's Baboon: Theosophy and the Emergence of the Western Guru* (London: Secker and Warburg, 1993), 20.

⁴⁰ Washington, 25.

relationship”⁴¹ between the spiritual and the secular, or the irrational and the rational, that motivated the growth of fin de siècle occultism thanks to its capacity to bridge these opposing notions by exchanging a strictly non-rational spirit, or soul, for a “secularized irrational,”⁴² which became known as the psychological self. And in fact, the resulting emphasis on human subjectivity, or interiority, in British fin de siècle occultism, though appearing to condone the occultists’ withdrawal into a private world of spiritual reflection, actually supported, in its attempt to overcome the emotional impoverishment and philosophical dissonance of post-Weberian “disenchantment,” a tendency toward radical social engagement⁴³ that, both in personal and political terms, accorded occultism a prominent place in a rational, modern world.

On a personal level, the occult movement offered a space in which liberating new ideas about feminism and sexuality could be explored. The Theosophical Society, for example, which was for decades the largest and most influential esoteric or occult organization, expressed an optimistic and even utopian impulse that included an emphasis on the equality of the sexes as well as a general striving for improved social welfare in its desire to facilitate the progressive evolutionary development of mankind.⁴⁴ In *Divine Feminine*, the historian Joy Dixon argues that the claims of theosophy, which replaced the Father God of traditional Christianity with a gender-neutral, impersonal and immanent model of the sacred - emphasizing above all, the rejection of dogmatism in favor of rational religious precepts - allowed for the creation of a kind of feminist spirituality. This feminist spirituality in turn fostered a feminist political ideology that encouraged women’s leadership and participation, lending support to the women’s suffrage movement, among other progressive causes.⁴⁵ Mary Farrell Bednarowski, a scholar of religion, also highlights theosophy’s emphasis on uniting political and personal

⁴¹ Owen, 144.

⁴² Owen, 116.

⁴³ Ibid. For, in a society previously ordered by religious faith and increasingly dissatisfied with the narrow rationalist materialism that replaced it, the creation of a psychologized self that fixates on “a rationalized experience of the spiritual” as a source of answers, serves as a kind of “secular enchantment” that creates a renewed sense of order and purpose and offers new ways to engage actively in the (rational) outside world.

⁴⁴ Michele Lacombe, “Theosophy and the Canadian Idealist Tradition: A Preliminary Exploration,” *Journal of Canadian Studies* 17, no. 2 (Summer 1982): 104.

⁴⁵ Joy Dixon, *Divine Feminine: Theosophy and Feminism in England* (Baltimore, Md.: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2001), 7. The feminist spirituality within the TS fostered a political ideology above all by rejecting private spirituality and instead attempting to “sacralize the public sphere.”

transformation and reform and traces a link between the TS and New Age thinking today that still calls for "the reform of most of society's institutions."⁴⁶ As for the occult attitude to sexuality, it varied from the relative permissiveness of the spiritualists -- a decentralized, mid-nineteenth-century movement of believers who pursued communication with the dead and whose resistance to institutional organization of all kinds contributed to their acceptance of sexual relationships outside of marriage -- to the greater conservatism of theosophy, which regarded sexual activity as acceptable within sanctioned marital relationships but as forbidden to serious students of the occult, for whom marriage would likely compromise their spiritual development. At any rate, the greater autonomy that occult movements tended to accord women allowed them the freedom to re-define their role both in private and public spheres.

The occult movement was also defined by its overtly political tendencies. In *The Occult Establishment*, the second of his two pioneering studies of the Western occult tradition (which he terms "underground" or "rejected" knowledge) James Webb explores what he defines as the second occult revival, which occurred in Europe and America in the wake of the First World War and during the years of rapid social change that led up to the Second, and argues that the notable difference between the two periods of occult activity is between the more inward spiritual or religious concerns of the first and the emphasis on ethics and social order in the second. Contending that this second occult movement oriented itself toward an implicitly political point of view, Webb defines many of the political movements of the 1920s and 30s as ones in which the expression of a common revulsion against materialism as well as a longing for a less individualistic and more cohesive society drew inspiration from the search for knowledge of other realities, causing occultism and social reform to rub shoulders.⁴⁷ Social Credit, a fringe political philosophy whose aim was to make the betterment of society the focus of the monetary system, was, according to Webb, one such "illuminated"⁴⁸ movement in which occult and political ideas commingled. And along with Social Credit, there existed a variety of

⁴⁶ Mary Farrell Bednarowski, *New Religions and the Theological Imagination in America* (Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Free Press, 1989), 17.

⁴⁷ James Webb, *The Occult Establishment* (La Salle, Illinois: Open Court Publishing Company, 1991), 26.

⁴⁸ Webb, *The Occult Establishment*, 124.

other reform movements united by an illuminated viewpoint, including theosophists, but also Christian socialists, guildsmen, and currency reformers. The common premise of these underground groups was that there was something drastically wrong with society, and their varied attempts to return the world to a Garden of Eden rested on the shared assumption that their political ideals had a spiritual basis.⁴⁹ Such was the case for Brother XII, whose enigmatic reign in British Columbia spanned the late 1920s and early 1930s, and who inspired followers with his vision, equally spiritual and political, of a new world led by a new race of spiritually enlightened humans, purified of corruption and injustice, and bathed in good will and brotherhood.

Thus, this study contributes to a growing body of historical scholarship that is reassessing the significance of nineteenth- and twentieth-century alternative spiritual movements and arguing for their centrality to the project of modernity. Some existing scholarship on Brother XII and his Aquarian Foundation, which includes academic articles by James A. Santucci and John Oliphant, seeks to clarify the parameters of Brother XII's philosophy by exploring its parallels to and divergences from the theosophical tradition. Other studies draw from a myriad of contradictory popular versions of the Brother XII story and attempt to offer a coherent narrative history of the Aquarian Foundation's rise and fall. These include John Oliphant's detailed book *Brother XII: The Incredible Story of Canada's False Prophet*, and two less well-documented accounts, one by Canadian authors Charles Lillard and Ron MacIsaac, and the other by Brother XII's supposed brother, later proven to be a fraud, Herbert Wilson. In her narrative history of utopian experiments in British Columbia, Justine Brown also offers a vivid re-telling of the Brother XII story, along with reflections on her own childhood memories of commune life in BC in the 1960s. None of these studies, however, explore as Joy Dixon does in *Divine Feminine*, the political salience of the personal spirituality cultivated within occult movements like the Theosophical Society. Dixon argues that the emphasis on mysticism and personal transformation within these movements did not render them marginal or derivative but actually promoted their active

⁴⁹ These illuminated movements covered the political spectrum from left to right and, along with their "illuminated" viewpoint, were as apt to share a tendency toward political anti-Semitism as toward socialism.

engagement in the world by translating their “intensely personal and subjective visions of the spiritual self” into “expansive social and political projects.”⁵⁰

All of this reveals the fundamental interconnectedness between occult movements like the Theosophical Society or Brother XII’s Aquarian Foundation and contemporary forms of political thought that are usually deemed secular in nature and therefore considered more pertinent to the rational and the modern. This study of Brother XII attempts to argue similarly that in the context of early twentieth-century BC, the man and the movement that have been long dismissed as a kooky footnote in the history of the province actually reveal something important about the intersection of the political and the spiritual in the early twentieth-century world of British Columbia. In fact, Brother XII has the honour of being British Columbia’s first Western (as opposed to Eastern) guru and the first New Age prophet, one, that is, who introduced a combination of occult knowledge and eastern spiritual ideas to western spiritual seekers, as well as personal authority, mass appeal, and new doctrines synthesizing elements from all the radical alternatives.⁵¹ Indeed, the trajectory of his movement, from the establishment, of an isolated, self-sufficient community in the new world of British Columbia to Wilson’s triumphant announcement of the dawn of a new age and the rapid dissolution of both in a storm of scandal serves as the blueprint for many subsequent movements that also sought radical social and political change through taking refuge in the isolated wilds of British Columbia. In the story of Brother XII, we see the changes that occur in an international, radical utopian movement like theosophy when it is transplanted and re-established in a particular place, in this case, British Columbia.

When Brother XII arrived in British Columbia with his disciples in 1927, his involvement with the Theosophical Society already dated back to a time he had spent in North America fifteen years earlier. Edward Arthur Wilson formally became a member of the TS in 1912 when, while living in California and working as a shipping clerk and later a mariner up and down the coast from California to British Columbia, he joined the

⁵⁰ Dixon, 223. She also argues on page 3 that politics and spirituality are intertwined: “A feminist spirituality was a crucial component of much feminist politics, and it was one of the sites at which feminist politics – for better or worse – was constituted and transformed.” Michele Lacombe also makes the argument that there is a direct connection between spiritual ideas and artistic and intellectual movements in her study of theosophy in Canada in the 1930s.

⁵¹ Washington, 24.

American section of the dominant Adyar branch.⁵² He also aligned himself with the conservative Back-to-Blavatsky wing within the Adyar membership, which rejected the teachings of the newest president, Annie Besant,⁵³ as being contradictory to the original message of Blavatsky and her Masters, which had as its primary focus the propagation of Universal Brotherhood.⁵⁴ Fifteen years later, Wilson based his own legitimacy as Brother XII on the claim that he was the next emissary -- and twelfth brother -- of the same Hidden Masters of the White Lodge, and thereby the direct inheritor of Blavatsky's mantle of leadership, declaring: "HPB is not behind you, buried in the 'eighties' where you would enshrine her. HPB is ahead of you, working in this very Cause of which I am a Messenger."⁵⁵ Although Wilson had quit the TS in 1918, when he reappeared as Blavatsky's defender in 1926 in pamphlet form and in the articles he published in *The Occult Review*, the preeminent London magazine devoted to occult subjects, Wilson explicitly presented his Message as a faithful replica of Blavatsky's theosophical principles, asserting that "the present Work announces no new Teacher, nor any new Truth; Its mission is to declare again the real meaning of Brotherhood."⁵⁶ At the same time, despite his ardent defense of Blavatsky's "great movement for the regeneration of spiritual life and principles,"⁵⁷ and his claim to champion its fundamental commitment to the unity of mankind, Wilson did not conceal his independence from the existing Theosophical Society, nor his divergent beliefs. In a 1926 letter to his followers, he expressed this directly and wrote: "Personally I am not a Theosophist in the sense of

⁵² John Oliphant, "The Teachings of Brother XII," *Theosophical History* IV, no. 6-7 (April 1993-July 1993): 194.

⁵³ Besant became president of the TS in 1907, and remained in that position until her death in 1933.

⁵⁴ Santucci, 44. This conservative movement within the Theosophical Society accused Besant of teaching a heretical form of "neo-theosophy" that introduced "new principles that were often in total opposition to the theosophy of Blavatsky and her Masters." This meant that Wilson opposed Besant's introduction within the TS of certain aspects of Catholicism, her new prophecy about a coming World-Teacher (soon to be known as Krishnamurti), her own and Leadbeater's writings as central theosophical texts, and a greater emphasis on the acquisition of occult powers rather than their study. Besant herself saw no conflict between Blavatsky's original insights and her own elaborations on those insights. So, in contrast to the claims of the Back-to-Blavatsky movement, Besant felt that she was continuing faithfully in the same tradition that Blavatsky had established with the Theosophical Society's founding in 1875.

⁵⁵ Wilson, *Foundation Letters and Teachings*, 67.

⁵⁶ Wilson, *FLT*, 33.

⁵⁷ Wilson, *FLT*, 153.

being a member of the TS, but I have passed through their school – and on beyond.”⁵⁸ The Theosophical Society may have been the starting point of Wilson’s spiritual journey, and he acknowledged that his “Message is largely couched in theosophical language” and “addressed to people who are familiar with this language.”⁵⁹ But in declaring that “the present work is not in any sense confined to the theosophical movement”⁶⁰ he was both defending the original theosophical principles of Blavatsky and, despite his protest to the contrary, preparing his followers to receive new esoteric truths that he alone would deliver.⁶¹ Little did his followers know then, however, to what extent he would stray from the theosophical ideals to which he purportedly subscribed, for, throughout the seven years of the community’s existence, the divide between Brother XII’s stated ideals and his increasingly erratic and aggressive behavior grew. This behavior, which contradicted the generous and communal spirit of his original ideals, included Wilson’s demand that his followers -- even the most elderly -- perform exhausting agricultural labour under the stern eye of his notoriously cruel mistress, Madame Zee. Additionally, he began to confiscate all of his colonists’ wealth, which he converted into gold coins that he stored in forty gallon-jars and eventually absconded with in 1933.

In fact, from the outset, Wilson’s views diverged considerably from mainline theosophy, and even challenged central theosophical claims, starting with the sinister millennial tone of his vision and extending into his views on sex, marriage, race, and nation. To begin with, in contrast with the general hopefulness of theosophy and most similar esoteric movements, Wilson offered an almost apocalyptic vision of the future. Blavatsky had expressed a fundamental belief in cosmic evolution, which, in characterizing the universe as a living and consciously evolving manifestation of the divine, both accounted for the theosophical laws of Karma, Reincarnation and Universal Brotherhood⁶² and prompted her followers to expect an ever brighter future. In

⁵⁸ Wilson, *FLT*, 50.

⁵⁹ Wilson, *FLT*, 50.

⁶⁰ Wilson, *FLT*, 71.

⁶¹ Wilson, *FLT*, 55. Wilson also explained that “the Masters gave esoteric truths far better than the orthodox Christian teachings, and we don’t have any other language to express them in.”

⁶² According to Ashcraft, Blavatsky understood evolution to be cyclical, and said that at every cyclical level – Round, Root-Race, sub-race – the life waves of reincarnated spiritual Egos passed through several phases. See page 43.

opposition to this, and to the progressive ethos that it engendered in theosophists, Wilson argued that the world was almost certainly doomed. In "The Shadow," the first article he published in London's *Occult Review* in 1926, he focused on the growing unrest in the world and attributed what he perceived as the rejection of Blavatsky's call to Universal Brotherhood.⁶³ Wilson prophesied that the continued rejection of Blavatsky's teaching would lead to nothing short of the imminent destruction of the civilization of the present age:

"All the evil forces... will shortly flood this physical world in such a tidal-wave of horror as no living generation has seen."⁶⁴

However, Wilson's Message had a purpose other than to defend Blavatsky's ideals or to enumerate the dire consequences of their rejection; Wilson also presented his Aquarian Foundation project in the face of this horror as a form of salvation for the chosen survivors whose spiritual insight would wisely impel them to take shelter in Wilson's *City of Refuge*.⁶⁵ Here, they would propagate a new generation of enlightened souls who would be shielded from "misconceptions and delusions" about the outer world.⁶⁶ Therefore, the loss of the old world was actually to be welcomed as a necessary preparation for a new world, one that would be peopled by the enlightened initiates of the Aquarian Foundation and their descendents.

Even if Wilson's claims agreed in principle, if not in tone, with the millennialism⁶⁷ that was intrinsic to theosophy's cyclical conception of the universe and its evolution, there was another difference to be found between Wilson's teachings and Blavatsky's theosophical vision concerning the question of messianism. Both Blavatsky and Besant made claims about a coming World-Teacher, an additional superhuman agent who would

⁶³ Wilson, *FLT*, 154.

⁶⁴ Wilson, *FLT*, 155.

⁶⁵ Ibid. He referred to his "mission...to save the remnant," the chosen survivors.

⁶⁶ Oliphant, "The Teachings of Brother XII," 209. Oliphant refers to Wilson's plan to propagate a new generation of enlightened people. Wilson, *FLT*, 2. Wilson promises that these people will be protected from the evil and ignorance of the outer world.

⁶⁷ Catherine Wessinger, *Annie Besant and Progressive Messianism: 1847-1933* (Lewiston, NY: The Edwin Mellen Press, 1988), 27. Religious scholar Catherine Wessinger refers to Blavatsky's sense of progression from bad times to good, as "progressive millennialism," which she describes as any millennial hope that a future golden era will arrive through cooperation between humans and a divine, or superhuman, will.

“accomplish the millennial state.”⁶⁸ Without identifying a specific individual, Blavatsky predicted that the “Torch Bearer of Truth”⁶⁹ would appear in the last quarter of the twentieth century, and in 1909, the same year that Besant adopted a young Indian boy named Krishnamurti, who would go on to be accorded and later reject the title of World-Teacher, she announced that the World-Teacher would soon arrive. Wilson also announced that, among the new generation of enlightened individuals that would be raised in his “centers of refuge” (more of which were to be built as time went on), a World Teacher would emerge. Once again, however, Wilson’s vision was an extreme version of the original theosophical teaching, as he proclaimed that the World Teacher would be nothing other than the fruit of his own loins – his and his young consort’s, the unhappily married and now adulterous Mrs. Myrtle Baumgartner.⁷⁰ Indeed, his insistence on the verity of his claim that he and Myrtle Baumgartner would produce the World Teacher was a final departure from the Blavatskian millennial theosophical vision, for in proclaiming himself the future father of the forthcoming savior of the world, Wilson was making a claim to nothing less than self-deification. This announcement even contradicted the understanding of the New Age and the process of its founding that Wilson’s immediate followers - who by 1928 numbered around two dozen resident colonists⁷¹ – had absorbed, and many rejected both his claim and his new mistress. Nevertheless, Wilson remained undeterred by the resistance of his followers to his messianic vision and in 1928, he presented a defensive articulation of a brand new teaching, this time on marriage and sexual matters, which he delineated in his article “On Marriage.” This marked another, more significant departure from theosophical teachings and revealed the degree to which Wilson was more radical than the theosophists themselves. For although he offended the sensibilities of middle-class British Columbians in the process -- a significant factor in his rejection by the popular BC press -- his teaching on marriage and sexuality represented a progressive social critique, and one that offered an unexpected echo of attitudes that prevailed in British Columbia’s history.

⁶⁸ Wessinger, 263.

⁶⁹ Wessinger, 275.

⁷⁰ Oliphant, “The Teachings of Brother XII,” 204.

⁷¹ Andrew Scott. *The Promise of Paradise*, 147.

From the very outset of Brother XII's public recognition in British Columbia, his sexual behavior, and therefore his integrity, was suspect. In fact, sexual scandal plagued the Aquarian Foundation (AF) soon after its establishment of the community of Cedar-by-Sea on Vancouver Island when the already-married Wilson returned from a fundraising trip in the summer of 1928 with a strange new woman, Mrs. Myrtle Baumgartner, in tow. He then announced to his followers that they were the avatars of the Egyptian gods Isis and Osiris and would produce the next World Teacher, who was to be the incarnation of the god Horus. Both his flagrant adultery (Mrs. Wilson also lived at Cedar-By-Sea) and his announcement provoked dismay, first among his two dozen resident followers, and afterwards among members of the AF throughout North America and Britain. In response, although without acknowledging the accusations made against him personally, Wilson mounted a defense of his views on sex and marriage in *The Chalice*, the monthly magazine he published with his most trusted followers, which announced itself as the "Herald of the New Age" and served as the official organ of the Aquarian Foundation.⁷² In the September 28, 1928 issue, Wilson published his polemical article entitled "On Marriage." It began with a disclaimer: "There is no single subject in the whole range of human interests so difficult to discuss as this."⁷³ He then warned that it is "not only difficult but dangerous" for anyone to question "established conventions" as they relate to sex and marriage, thereby communicating that this is precisely what he proposed to do. Ultimately seeking to justify his sexual relationship with Myrtle Baumgartner as divinely sanctioned and fundamental to the Aquarian Foundation's work of procreation, which entailed the repopulating of the planet with a new generation of enlightened souls,⁷⁴ Wilson's larger intention was to reveal the esoteric, or occult, purpose of sex and reproduction and thereby to reconfigure prevailing assumptions about sex and marriage at their very root.

⁷² Santucci, 8. *The Chalice* was published from 1927-31 by Wilson and his most trusted followers, including Will Levington Comfort, an American novelist and frequent contributor to the *Saturday Evening Post*.

⁷³ Edward Arthur Wilson, "On Marriage," *The Chalice* (September 28, 1928): 6.

⁷⁴ Wilson, *Foundation Letters and Teachings*, 16. "The children who by their karma will be drawn to parents who are linked up with this present Work belong to a group of highly evolved egos who are now beginning to come into incarnation. They must be kept free from karmic ties or links connecting them with the old and dying order. They will be the Thinkers and Leaders in that new order which shall rise from the ashes of the old."

Wilson's ideas, which included a rejection of the constraints of monogamous marriage and an affirmation of the need for the expression of sexual desire as a catalyst for both personal and spiritual growth, ran counter to the customary attitudes about sexual propriety, including modesty, monogamy and the sanctity of marriage, that were held by most British Columbians in the 1920s. These attitudes were certainly held by the middle-class, *Daily Province* newspaper-reading public, which can be deduced by the frisson of scandal that Bruce McKelvie's newspaper reports were intended to produce. What he described, euphemistically, as the "mingling of the sexes...in defiance of recognized marriage laws," exposing what he understood to be Brother XII's open pursuit of extra-marital sexual encounters, appeared shocking even to him. And assuming his readers would agree, McKelvie wrote a second article on the subject one day later, on October 29, 1928, in which he emphatically repeated, not once but twice, the words of the petition circulated by resident members of the Aquarian Foundation against the actions of their leader, which read: "It is not in the interests of decency and order that the said society should continue to exist."⁷⁵ Furthermore, in a *Victoria Daily Colonist* article written four years later in 1932, documenting the contentious court battle then being waged between Aquarian Foundation members and Brother XII over property rights to the Aquarian Foundation's holdings, the community was mockingly referred to as a "colony of love."⁷⁶ All of these critical or pejorative references to Brother XII's alleged adulterous sexual encounters reveal conservative attitudes to sex and marriage that reflected a Christian, middle-class, Anglo-Canadian image of respectability prevalent among British Columbians.

That same idea of respectability as applied to sexual behavior was echoed in the attitudes of most theosophists of the post-World War One era, who, despite radical tendencies in other areas of social reform, retained conventionally middle-class views on sex. Within the theosophical press internationally, voices such as that of H.N. Stokes, the respected editor of the Washington, D.C.-based theosophist newspaper *the O.E. Library Critic* and a firm opponent of the Aquarian Foundation, spoke out against the sexual immorality of Brother XII. Just two months after the publication of McKelvie's

⁷⁵ Bruce McKelvie, "Dissolution of Island Cult Urged," *Vancouver Daily Province*, 29 October, 1928, 17.

⁷⁶ "Colony of Love Planned on Island," *Victoria Daily Colonist*, 6 November, 1932, 1.

scandalized newspaper articles that broke the Brother XII story to British Columbians, Stokes presented damning evidence against the Aquarian Foundation leader by revealing in his December 1928 article, "The Brother XII Bubble Bursts," the fact that it was generally believed that Wilson "was advocating sex relations which differed little, if at all, from promiscuity."⁷⁷ For Stokes, who believed he was chronicling the demise of Wilson's experiment, the real transgression was his "infusion of free love ideas" into his community, which, Stokes noted, shocked Wilson's bewildered followers, themselves "entirely respectable people"⁷⁸ who objected to Wilson's behavior and the doubt it cast on the integrity not only of his spiritual principles, but also their own. Theosophists in Britain were equally sensitive to charges of sexual impropriety leveled against them, particularly after the very public sex scandal in 1906 involving Charles Webster Leadbeater, the most influential theosophical writer of his time.⁷⁹ It was his suspect behavior with young male members of the TS that, according to Joy Dixon in her discussion of theosophical debates on sexuality in Edwardian Britain, reversed the "fairly progressive position"⁸⁰ that the TS had occupied earlier on the question of sexuality. Indeed, Dixon observes that despite some isolated voices advocating free love and women's right to sexual pleasure, thereafter "theosophists as a group offered, on the whole, a relatively conservative analysis of sex and sexuality."⁸¹ This analysis would have supported the then-current notion that chastity and sexual self-control were the most laudable sexual values for both men and women. Indeed, even though celibacy was not considered to be "theosophical dogma,"⁸² it was advocated by many theosophists who believed that total abstinence from sexual relations was necessary to achieve significant "occult progress."⁸³ For, at the very root of its esoteric occult tradition, theosophy identified sex as problematic. Theosophists perceived both sexual and spiritual energy as

⁷⁷ H.N. Stokes, "The Brother XII Bubble Bursts". *The O.E. Library Critic* (December, 1928), (no page numbers indicated).

⁷⁸ Loc. Cit. in Stokes, "The Brother XII Bubble Bursts" (no page numbers indicated).

⁷⁹ Santucci, 6. This was the scandal in which Leadbeater shocked his fellow Edwardians (both theosophists and non-theosophists alike), and weakened the credibility of the Theosophical Society in the process, by admitting to instructing young men in the universally condemned practice of masturbation. He was readmitted two years after his 1906 expulsion from the TS, in 1908.

⁸⁰ Dixon, 107.

⁸¹ Dixon, 116.

⁸² Dixon, 172.

⁸³ Dixon, 104.

creative forces, linked to “the mystery of regeneration,”⁸⁴ but they believed that desire undermined spiritual progress by “disturb[ing] and agitat[ing] the astral body”⁸⁵ whose powers were needed for occult practice. This led to their conviction that, to prevent incorrect spiritual development, sexual feelings needed to be controlled and disciplined. Similar attitudes prevailed amongst members of the American Theosophical Society at Pt. Loma, where followers of Katherine Tingley supported her uncompromising inculcation of middle-class moral values concerning sexuality in Pt. Loma’s children.⁸⁶ In addition, she insisted that monogamy and marriage were “laws which govern human life [and] are immutable”⁸⁷ and resisted any attempts on the part of her married adult followers to forsake their marriages or pursue alternate relationships. All of this provides a marked contrast with Wilson’s ideas about sex and marriage, which in comparison to the conservatism of the TS, were radical and daring.

In fact, despite his stated affinity with theosophical spiritual principles, Wilson’s views on sex and marriage, as articulated in “On Marriage,” were much closer to the radical democratic stance of the mid-nineteenth century spiritualist movement (from whose ranks many converts to theosophy would later emerge) than to the conservatism of theosophists themselves. Like spiritualists, who advocated “free love” and opposed the “oppressive powers of the state,”⁸⁸ especially in its regulation of intimate relationships within marriage, Wilson forcefully rejected the coercive power of institutions -- both church and state -- to regulate sexual and emotional behaviour in the name of orthodox marriage. In addition, he argued for a more enlightened understanding of sexual desire as both an ordinary force of nature, which should be accorded its place and not suppressed to defend a specious, imposed morality, and also as the means to facilitate a spiritual encounter between highly evolved individuals for whom sexual gratification itself is merely incidental. Spiritualists also identified an important spiritual dimension to sexual

⁸⁴ Dixon, 104.

⁸⁵ Dixon, 106.

⁸⁶ Ashcraft, 138. These included the total withholding of sexual information from girls, and the teaching of “heroic virtue” to boys, which relegated masturbation and sex in general to an impulse of their lower nature that they must seek to overcome.

⁸⁷ Ashcraft, 140.

⁸⁸ Ann Braude, *Radical Spirits: Spiritualism and Women’s Rights in Nineteenth-Century America* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2001), 128.

relationships and argued -- without denying sexual attraction as a valid force in creating relationships -- that the real measure of a union's worth was the sincerity of emotional attachment between the partners and the degree to which they were spiritually compatible. Therefore, for spiritualists, "free love" implied not sexual permissiveness but the belief that the morality of sexual intercourse was a function of the sincere mutual desire of the parties, as well as of their "spiritual affinity," rather than their marital status.⁸⁹ An additional element of radical critique shared by Wilson and the spiritualists can be found in a common feminist sensibility that criticized marriage for the threats to women's autonomy it imposed. Where the spiritualists highlighted the legal and personal discrimination marriage inflicted on them,⁹⁰ Wilson rejected the cynical marketing of a woman's youth and beauty in exchange for the financial security and social status that marriage would bring her. Ultimately, as an unorganized and decentralized movement unified only by a common belief in the possibility of communication with the spirits of the dead, spiritualism -- unlike theosophy -- could make room on its fringes for radical claims about sex and spirituality and their role in marriage. For his part, Brother XII, though affiliating himself with theosophy as an identifiable organization and set of beliefs, also placed himself increasingly on the fringe of that movement by transforming its claims. From there he could present radical views not only about moral considerations in sex and marriage, but also about their very purpose in the scheme of life, thus demonstrating to what degree these claims challenged mainstream views and served as more than a pretext to justify his own sexual behavior.

In writing "On Marriage," Wilson was defending his adulterous affair with Mrs. Baumgartner (and subsequent partners as well) on moral and spiritual grounds, both of which were intended to turn conventional ideas about spirit and flesh upside down. First, as a consensual union freely entered into in defiance of legitimate legal and religious sanctions -- read, the institution of marriage -- and secondly as the execution of a great occult mystery performing a service for humanity, Wilson's sexual encounters with Mrs. Baumgartner were not just justifiable but necessary to produce the child who would

⁸⁹ Braude, 128. However, opponents of their radical stance, like the detractors of Brother XII, appropriated the term "free love" to undermine the legitimacy of their, and his, reform position by using it to imply promiscuity and "a basic undermining of accepted values."

⁹⁰ Braude, 131.

become Brother XII's successor and the World Teacher "in or about 1975."⁹¹ Wilson used his polemical article to achieve the dual purpose of challenging received notions about sex and marriage and proposing a new interpretation of both by advancing four central claims. The first claim was that the sources of authority, both legal and ecclesiastical, regulating marriage, and therefore sexual behavior, were "man-made"⁹² and not immutable. The second claim was that neither marriage, which was not solely about sex, nor sex itself, which is an acceptable and natural bodily function, required regulation -- least of all the tyrannical expectation of marital sexual fidelity. The third claim was that marriages came in three very different "classes or degrees of union between the sexes,"⁹³ which correlated respectively to the three human elements of body, mind and soul. And finally, the fourth claim was that the role of sex in that third and most exalted type of marriage was not an end or form of gratification in itself, but a means of achieving a spiritually-directed act of procreation that would provide "a particular kind and quality of physical vehicle for a known type of incoming soul."⁹⁴ In fact, this third form of marriage, which was the only one in which the three primary elements were joined and the spiritual procreative function was achieved, was the only true marriage according to occult principles. Therefore, Wilson's encounters with Mrs. Baumgartner, which constituted a primary example of this third type of spiritual marriage, were to be the furthest thing possible from an idle or immoral sexual dalliance.

To make sense of this claim, however, it is necessary to realize that, for Wilson, the term "marriage" itself also had an alternate, occult meaning. In fact, in rejecting the social and religious institutions upholding conventional marriage, Wilson was rejecting the very notion of marriage as a permanent, exclusive, and externally-sanctioned relationship. Instead, he considered any consciously-conceived union to be a marriage, regardless of its duration or the considerations of anyone but the two people involved; only they could decide when the union should dissolve, not the church or state. Here,

⁹¹ Oliphant, "The Teachings of Brother XII," 202. Unfortunately for both Wilson and Myrtle Baumgartner, Brother XII's predictions did not come true, and in her attempt to bear the child who would become the future World Teacher, Myrtle Baumgartner had not one but two miscarriages before leaving the community in a state of "mental breakdown." Of course, none of this had yet come to pass when the article "On Marriage" appeared in *The Chalice*.

⁹² Wilson, "On Marriage," 14.

⁹³ Wilson, "On Marriage," 13.

⁹⁴ Wilson, "On Marriage," 14.

again, Wilson echoed the attitudes of spiritualists, who, in rejecting the legitimating power of marriage vows, also argued for a couple's right to dissolve their union and, with sincerity of emotion or "spiritual affinity" fuelling their attraction, pursue new relationships without the social stigma of sexual immorality being applied.⁹⁵ And yet, while according the pursuit of sexual pleasure a valid place in human experience -- and even more resoundingly so than the spiritualists were willing to -- Wilson consistently denied that the freedom to pursue pleasure, including the pleasurable aspect of the sexual encounters he shared with Mrs. Baumgartner, was what mattered most. Instead, it was the hidden, occult purpose of sexual union, a purpose that is achieved in only a few, select unions that he wanted his readers and supporters to come to understand. Self-consciously respectable British Columbians reading about his sexual exploits in their daily paper would not have believed him, and theosophists, whose beliefs and assumptions had shaped much of Wilson's original message, felt that he was sullyng their reputation or undermining their legitimacy. Therefore, Wilson's vision of a non-coercive and spiritually-inspired relational ideal, which he shared with the spiritualists and which at its very foundation sought to reconfigure prevailing assumptions about sex and marriage, appears very radical indeed. And yet, its spiritual rather than sensual justification notwithstanding, Wilson's refusal to bow to conventional moral restrictions on sexual behavior is not without precedent in the history of British Columbia, whose remote nineteenth-century colonial frontier shielded the widespread practice of socially transgressive behaviors, sexual and otherwise.

In *On the Edge of Empire: Gender, Race and the Making of British Columbia, 1849-1871*, historian Adele Perry explores the tension between Victorian social norms and ideals and the rough realities of colonial life in nineteenth-century British Columbia, "a resource-oriented colony with an emergent settler society" that had only recently been a chaotic gold-rush society "grafted onto" an isolated fur-trade settlement.⁹⁶ In that unruly environment, where a limited number of religious and political reformers⁹⁷

⁹⁵ Braude, 133.

⁹⁶ Adele Perry, *On the Edge of Empire: Gender, Race and the Making of British Columbia, 1849-1871* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2001), 9.

⁹⁷ Perry, 15. These reformers included journalist-politicians, like the future provincial governor Amor de Cosmos, who had ties to the gold and merchant economy of British Columbia.

attempted fruitlessly to influence the small, undisciplined and predominantly male population of white settlers, the normative standards of nineteenth-century Anglo-American social life were largely disregarded. There were many ways in which the rowdy male culture in the mostly homosocial backwoods of British Columbia failed to live up to the mid-nineteenth-century ideal of an orderly, white settler colony made up of "sober, hard-working men, virtuous women and respectable families."⁹⁸ Prominent among them was the perceived transgression exemplified both in the widespread existence of sexual relationships between white men and aboriginal women as well as in the more sparsely documented occurrence of homosexual relationships between men.⁹⁹ But of even greater concern to religious and political authorities who believed in the colony's potential as an agricultural, white settler society "anchored in respectable gender and racial behaviors and identities"¹⁰⁰ was the threat to white purity of mixed-race relationships. The bulk of colonial male British Columbians proved indifferent to these concerns, however, and although some sought only provisional relationships with First Nations women, abandoning them when white women became available, other men chose long-term native female partners for their superior knowledge of backwoods life, while still others eagerly sought casual sexual liaisons with aboriginal women as part of the travel experience.¹⁰¹ It is true that these mixed-race relationships, informed as they were by paternalism and essentialist, pejorative visions of First Nations women and men, hardly symbolized aboriginal women's sexual liberation. Yet, the existence of mixed-race relationships on British Columbia's colonial frontier does indicate a willingness on the part of the white colonial men to disregard reformers' discourses on whiteness, manliness and morality, including their warning that this supposedly pathological¹⁰² sexual behavior was imperiling the reputation of the white race and the colony,¹⁰³ which

⁹⁸ Perry, 17.

⁹⁹ Perry, 32. From 1849 and 1871 at least four men were charged with "sodomy" or "buggery" in three separate trials, which attests to the serious social sanction of these sexual behaviors.

¹⁰⁰ Perry, 3.

¹⁰¹ Perry, 61.

¹⁰² Perry, 74. Popular and scientific wisdom in the nineteenth century held that sex across racial lines was biologically as well as socially dangerous.

¹⁰³ Perry, 101.

in its way prefigures Brother XII's own defiance of social norms in relationship to sexuality.

Much of British Columbia maintained this rebellious frontier culture with its relative indifference to middle-class social ideals until late into the nineteenth century, when, for example, previously ambivalent attitudes toward "half-breeds," the products of mixed race relationships, hardened into intolerance.¹⁰⁴ For one thing, until the onset of the First World War, British Columbia remained a male-dominated place where women equaled less than half the number of men among the non-native population.¹⁰⁵ This was unlike the rest of Canada, where the ratio of men to women was much closer,¹⁰⁶ and the only places in British Columbia where the gender balance was about even were found in the two new cities of Victoria,¹⁰⁷ and Vancouver, whose population, which included increasing numbers of white families, had already exceeded Victoria's by the turn of the twentieth century.¹⁰⁸ Outside of the cities, however, male frontier attitudes prevailed amongst the miners and foresters who settled the province and frequented the many saloons and brothels whose services they demanded. Contributing also to this practical social permissiveness of sinful behavior -- despite the reforming efforts of social gospelers, such as Methodists and Presbyterians -- was the secular nature of British Columbia: Indeed, the 1901 census revealed the province as having the lowest level of churchgoing in the country. Canadian historian Lynn Marks notes that the ratio of communicants, or active churchgoers and believers, to adherents, or nominal Christians,

¹⁰⁴ Robert A.J. McDonald, *Making Vancouver: Class, Status and Social Boundaries, 1863-1913* (Vancouver: UBC Press, 1996), 24. In Vancouver, where "most respectable residents of Burrard Inlet had European wives" by 1880, the social exclusion of mixed-race couples and "half-breeds", in addition to that of First Nations people overall, happened sooner.

¹⁰⁵ Barman, 100. In the 1870s in British Columbia there was one woman for every three men, and by WW1, there was one woman for every two men in the non-native population.

¹⁰⁶ W. Peter Ward, "Class and Race in the Social Structure of British Columbia, 1870-1939", *BC Studies*, no. 45 (Spring 1980): 25.

¹⁰⁷ Barman, 100. In Victoria, the male-female ratio remained mostly even.

¹⁰⁸ McDonald, 93. McDonald offers data from Canada's 1921 census, which shows that by 1911, Victoria's population was only 31,660 compared to Vancouver's figure of 100,401. And in 1921, the population totals for Victoria and Vancouver respectively were 38,727 and 117,217. McDonald also argues that white Vancouverites defined social respectability in terms of family membership, which enabled Vancouverites of all class levels to distinguish themselves from the city's "rougher" element of single working men. This was possible, presumably, because there were adequate numbers of white women to marry.

in British Columbia was less than sixty percent of the national average,¹⁰⁹ which would have had an impact on the enforcement of moral standards by the community, since the majority of these standards were set and regulated through the social authority of the churches. In addition, the relative “godlessness” of BC as compared with the rest of the country could be seen in the overrepresentation in the province of those who did not appear to believe in God. Indeed, in 1901 ten times as many people in BC as in Canada as a whole defined themselves as atheists, freethinkers, or agnostics or told the census taker they had no religion -- even the women.¹¹⁰ This tendency toward secularism, along with the marked presence of hard-working, hard-drinking young male workers throughout most of the province,¹¹¹ in large part explains why BC was the first English-speaking province in Canada to repeal prohibition, a primarily Methodist and Presbyterian ideal, which it did in 1920, only four years after its institution.¹¹² However, if Brother XII’s defiant justification of his own transgressive sexual behavior is in some way an echo of the socially transgressive attitudes that largely prevailed amongst working men in colonial British Columbia, another theme in Wilson’s writing that also clearly preoccupied the dominant society throughout the history of British Columbia is that of race.

In his discourse about race and nation Wilson also profoundly challenged and transformed theosophical ideas and inadvertently reflected underlying racial attitudes in British Columbia’s history. The language of race was central to theosophical discourse and part of its radical critique because theosophists believed that the collective evolution of the human “race” mattered just as much as the evolution of each individual in his particular incarnation.¹¹³ Indeed, theosophy articulated its understanding of the evolution

¹⁰⁹ Lynne Marks, “Exploring Regional Diversity in Patterns of Religious Participation,” *Historical Methods*, Vol 33 Issue 4 (Fall 2000): 249.

¹¹⁰ Marks, 249. 1.5 percent of British Columbians were free thinkers compared to 0.6 percent of Canadians.

¹¹¹ Robert A. Campbell, “Liquor and Liberals: Patronage and Government Control in British Columbia, 1920-28,” *BC Studies* 77 (Spring 1988): 35. “Dry sentiment was far from unanimous in BC, where the economy was dominated by young male wage earners in resource-based industries.”

¹¹² The fact that there was a higher proportion of Anglicans in BC and that they favored moderation over outright prohibition also contributed to the earlier repeal of the prohibition law in BC.

¹¹³ Wessinger, 195. Madame Blavatsky’s *Secret Doctrine* presented “a scheme of human racial evolution that would culminate in a human condition in which all would perceive and participate in the underlying unity of the One Existence, and Universal Brotherhood would be a living reality.”

of humanity in terms of its concept of the seven “root-races,” by which theosophy meant civilizations¹¹⁴ whose evolution through human history was seen as evidence of the divine progression of the universe itself.¹¹⁵ This underlay Blavatsky’s belief that changes during her own historical era were intrinsic to large-scale evolutionary progress, and that in her century, a mixing of “racial strains” would produce a new and progressively more enlightened class of humans. Despite some ambiguity in Blavatsky’s racial theory of history, which, as historian Jill Roe notes in her study of theosophy in Australia, *Beyond Belief*, “could encourage patronizing attitudes,”¹¹⁶ theosophy embraced some progressive ideas about race. And, like much other progressive thought in the late nineteenth century, theosophical views on racial progress, such as those that theosophists shared with other “respectable citizens who believed that right political action and social engineering would lead to the good society,”¹¹⁷ echo the language of eugenics, which, with its hierarchical classification of humans based on assumed racial and genetic characteristics and its proposed improvement of our species by restricting reproduction only to those individual with genetic characteristics that have been judged desirable, has been in disrepute since the Nazi era. Indeed, Leadbeater himself determined that reproduction was best left to people of a “better sort,” as “the future of the race depend[ed]...principally on prospective parents in the cultured classes.”¹¹⁸ Nevertheless, in comparison to existing racial attitudes of the late-nineteenth and early-twentieth century, the TS priority to promote “brotherhood regardless of racial discrimination”¹¹⁹ expressed less racial

¹¹⁴ Lacombe, 101. For theosophists, these were still biologically based civilizations, not “cultures” in a non-racial sense.

¹¹⁵ Ibid. Divine progression was a “manifestation of the evolving root-principle of the universe.” Theosophists identified particular root-races with specific eras, naming, for example, the humans of the Christian era the “fifth root-race”, and anticipating that the next step in race evolution, the birth of the sixth root-race, would be achieved in a post-Christian twentieth century North America.

¹¹⁶ Jill Roe, *Beyond Belief: Theosophy in Australia 1879-1939* (Kensington, Australia: New South Wales University Press, 1986), 282.

¹¹⁷ Roe, 283.

¹¹⁸ Roe, 311. And in the case of the racist laws in Australia, *Advance! Australia*, the theosophical newspaper promoting Australian nationalism, sustained Besant’s assertion that Australian racial prejudice resulted from ignorance, but also accepted the necessity of the White Australia Policy as a temporary “economic and moral necessity.”

¹¹⁹ Roe, 281.

prejudice than attitudes, such as those that promoted a “racially pure society,”¹²⁰ that prevailed in the newly settled British Columbia of the mid-nineteenth century. In the context of the time, the TS was relatively progressive on questions of race.

For his part, Wilson’s ideas about race were initially expressed in conventional racial terms similar to those of theosophists and idealist British colonial leaders in general. He too, conveyed the underlying paternalism of the “white man’s burden” when he called Great Britain the “‘mother of nations’ [whose]... purpose in the economy of Races ... [was] to found and settle the young and growing people in her ‘colonies.’”¹²¹ And Wilson’s Aquarian Foundation teachings were shaped by the same post-Darwinist concepts of spiritual evolution that were reflected in the theosophical theory of history, but his use of the language of race was different. Indeed, Wilson’s racial views became less paternalistic and more sinister when he began to reveal his conspiracy theories, which accused Jews and Catholics of plotting world domination. Therefore, Wilson’s race discourse as applied to his political ideology distinguished him, again, from Theosophical ideas of race in its outright expression of racial intolerance, particularly in his anti-Semitism and prejudice toward Catholics.

While Wilson, like most theosophists, initially prioritized social justice, laying the blame for the lack of brotherhood -- the fundamental social and spiritual problem identified by all theosophists -- on an unjust and corrupt economic system, Wilson went on to develop a racist explanation, which consisted of a conspiracy theory that implicated Roman Catholic religious leaders and Jewish bankers in a secret plot to dominate the world through promoting war for profit and rendering the masses passive and demoralized. Wilson revealed his own anti-Semitism by overtly referencing such anti-Semitic propaganda as the fictitious blueprint for Jewish world domination “The Protocols of the Elders of Zion,” and declaring that the most critical threat to the world consisted in a “Jewish plot [to control] Wall Street.”¹²² Wilson also declared that, as Brother XII, “his immediate task was to contribute materially to *the overthrow of unrighteousness...*, and to overturn those two great examples of *organized Evil*, the

¹²⁰ Barman, 148. This was especially true after Governor Douglas finished his term of office in BC in 1864.

¹²¹ Wilson, *FLT*, 85.

¹²² Edward Arthur Wilson, *The End of Days* (Nanaimo, Canada: The Chalice Press, 1928), 32.

Jewish world-monopoly of wealth and the Roman Catholic Hierarchy.”¹²³ This attribution of the world’s most serious problems to the supposed corruption of racial groups whose inferiority he proclaimed revealed Wilson’s racist views.

The method he proposed to counter this problem was to create a Protestant Protective League, which he described as an organization that “unites and co-ordinates the anti-Catholic interests of all countries; it is super-national and is dedicated to the welfare of humanity.”¹²⁴ Here he took pains to engage the concerns of his Canadian readership, praising Canada as “a friendly and Protestant country,” and declaring that a Catholic victory, especially in the 1928 US presidential elections where the Republican candidate was a Catholic, would be an attack on “every Protestant man and woman in this country, upon the honor of Canada and upon the honor of Canada and upon the honour of her chief minister.”¹²⁵ Therefore, he called for “the personal and earnest cooperation of every Protestant man and woman in Canada at this time”¹²⁶ and invited them to join the Protestant Protective League. Yet, Wilson’s views challenged the theosophical mainstream and offended members of the Canadian Theosophical Society. Indeed, in the June 15, 1927 issue of *The Canadian Theosophist*, after his bigoted political pronouncements against the Catholic Church in the name of all Canadians had appeared in the pages of *The Chalice*,¹²⁷ an article entitled “The Blind Leaders of the Blind”¹²⁸ repudiated Wilson and his Aquarian Foundation, questioning his knowledge of and loyalty to Canada. The author scoffed at Wilson’s mistaking of the “R.C.” in R.C.M.P. for “Roman Catholic”, a mistake that had clearly fuelled his paranoia, and dismissed Wilson’s anti-Catholic “propaganda” by declaring instead that “there can be no finer people anywhere than the Roman Catholic *habitants* of Quebec.”¹²⁹ Indeed, *the Canadian Theosophist* dismissed Wilson and his views outright, calling *The Chalice* “an

¹²³ Wilson, *The End of Days*, 32.

¹²⁴ Edward Arthur Wilson, *The Three Truths* (London: The Chalice Press, 1927), 87.

¹²⁵ Wilson, *The End of Days*, 19.

¹²⁶ Wilson, *The End of Days*, 27.

¹²⁷ Reprinted in Wilson, *End of Days*, 16. Wilson criticized a Canadian diplomatic mission to Mexico to discuss Canadian financing of the Mexican national railway service, warning that if the mission were successful, it would contribute to “the Romish conspiracy whose ultimate objective is the domination of the North American continent by the Hierarchy of Rome.”

¹²⁸ “The Blind Leaders of the Blind,” *The Canadian Theosophist* VIII, no. 4 (June 15, 1927): 57.

¹²⁹ Ibid.

anti-Canadian sheet, [whose] editors do not know what Canada's ideals are."¹³⁰

Additionally, the article characterized Wilson as a "shrewd faker [who] plays on the fears of half-educated or wholly ignorant people."¹³¹ Many of Wilson's attitudes appeared reactionary by the standards of his primarily Eastern Canadian theosophical peers.

Yet, if Wilson's views about race seemed bigoted or ignorant to some of his theosophical contemporaries, they were not necessarily out of place in his era in British Columbia, where, throughout its colonial history and beyond, status was a function of race and racial hierarchies were a defining feature of everyday life. Indeed, as Canadian historian W. Peter Ward has argued, British Columbians divided themselves along racial lines even more than along class lines. In his study of early Vancouver, the historian Robert A.J. McDonald also notes that the members of the city's British majority defined themselves as respectable citizens regardless of their class¹³² in order to set themselves apart from the male immigrant labourers whom they denigrated as non-white and not respectable outsiders.¹³³ Indeed, McDonald reminds us that race is a social rather than biological category, which serves to denote both insider and outsider status within a group. In British Columbia, during Wilson's sojourn there, whiteness remained a "designation for insiders"¹³⁴ and, according to historian Scott Kerwin, the dominant historical narrative of the 1920s defined BC as a land of white pioneers struggling to maintain their new land as a home for the white race in the face of threatening numbers of Asian immigrants.¹³⁵ It is true that in 1881, over 99 percent of Canada's Chinese population was living in British Columbia, where nearly 20 percent of the population was Chinese, and although this percentage reduced considerably in the years that followed,¹³⁶ strong expressions of white racism against the Chinese persisted, especially in the cities

¹³⁰ Ibid.

¹³¹ Ibid., 58.

¹³² McDonald, xx.

¹³³ McDonald, 208. Even Italians, whose population had surged in Vancouver just before WW1, were defined as "coloured". They had become very visible and were seen as "threatening to the city's British character. Italian stereotypes bore a close resemblance to those used to describe Chinese and other Asian workers."

¹³⁴ McDonald, 208. Additionally these insiders could be of British, Canadian or American origin only.

¹³⁵ Scott Kerwin, "The Janet Smith Bill of 1924 and the Language of Race and Nation in British Columbia", *BC Studies*, no. 121 (Spring 1999), 112.

¹³⁶ Barman, 364. These statistics come from the Census of Canada. In 1911 British Columbia's Asian population reduced to 12.8 percent of the total, and in 1921 to 7.2 percent.

where they were the dominant minority.¹³⁷ Examples of typically racist policies include the head tax that was imposed on Chinese immigrants to British Columbia, which by 1903 was raised to \$500 for each male,¹³⁸ and the establishment of an Asiatic Exclusion League, members of which incited race riots in Vancouver in 1907. Indeed, a 1924 bill that attempted to keep white women and Asian men apart in the workplace and whose subtext was an opposition to miscegenation in BC, reveals the language of race and nation, along with its sexual dimensions, that was used by BC's white elite in the 1920s.¹³⁹ These racist acts¹⁴⁰ and the attitudes that supported them also contributed to the province's sense of separation from the rest of Canada. For, as early as 1881 British Columbians of the dominant society felt -- whether it was true or not -- that they had a unique racial problem that was not understood or appreciated by the federal government or other Canadians.¹⁴¹

It is also possible, amidst the social and economic volatility of the post-war 1920s and 30s, to find parallels to Wilson's views on race in other political and spiritual philosophies, both in Canada and beyond.¹⁴² These parallels can be found in some expressions of Social Credit, a political movement founded in Britain in the early 1920s that had a strong sympathy for radical and mystical ideas. As a political and economic program Social Credit argued for a kind of economic nationalism, but as a philosophy

¹³⁷ Barman, 135. In 1873 an anti-Chinese society was formed in Victoria to discourage Chinese competition with whites in the workplace and in 1878 the provincial legislature banned anyone Chinese from government employment.

¹³⁸ Barman, 146.

¹³⁹ Kerwin. In the wake of an unsolved murder case, where a white domestic servant, named Janet Smith, was alleged to have been killed by her Chinese colleague, the Janet Smith Bill of 1924 was unsuccessfully presented in the provincial legislature with the intent of forbidding the co-employment of white women and Asian men. The actual intention of the bill was to prevent sexual contact between white women and Asian men, thereby protecting the ability of those same white women to produce White babies and ensuring the reproduction of a white BC.

¹⁴⁰ Similarly exclusionary and prejudicial attitudes in BC were expressed toward the other significant non-white minorities, including Japanese and East Indians (or South Asians), which culminated in discriminatory abuses such as the internment of Japanese-Canadians in British Columbia in 1941 and the 1914 Komogato Maru incident in Vancouver's harbour, which denied a shipload of South Asian immigrants entrance to the country. And, as we have seen, even non-British Europeans, such as Italian labourers, were the object of racist labeling and social exclusion in Vancouver.

¹⁴¹ Barman, 135.

¹⁴² John Oliphant, *Brother Twelve: The Incredible Story of Canada's False Prophet* (Toronto: McClelland and Stewart, 1991), 74.

Social Credit presented an “ideal of social reorganization”¹⁴³ that expressed faith in the goodness of human nature. However it also offered a more sinister interpretation of history “in terms of a long-existing Judaic plot or conspiracy to secure control of and dominate the world.”¹⁴⁴ Elements of the politics and the philosophy of Social Credit were embraced by many theosophists, especially in Canada during the 1920s and 30s, when theosophy was at the height of its popularity in that country.¹⁴⁵

Wilson’s racial discourse also resembled that of other radical, “illuminated” political movements that were affiliated with Social Credit. One such movement was the Kibbo Kift, which was established in Britain in 1920 by John Hargrave to fulfill his mission of regenerating the Anglo-Saxon race.¹⁴⁶ Both Brother XII and Hargrave claimed to be working toward “one common aim, world unity” and both, like most proponents of Social Credit and its philosophy of monetary reform, were thereby attempting to re-assert the communal values that were seen to be vanishing in a society being undermined by big business and international finance. And yet the historian John Finlay argues that this same defense of communal values against the perceived divisiveness and corruption inflicted on societies by an international financial elite – which was assumed to be Jewish -- contributed to the decline of Social Credit supporters into a kind of neo-fascism. This was certainly the case for Brother XII, whose

¹⁴³ Roe, 335.

¹⁴⁴ John A. Irving, *The Social Credit Movement in Alberta* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1959), 59.

¹⁴⁵ Lacombe, 113. A five-part article *The A.B.C. of Social Credit* written by William Rose appeared in *The Canadian Theosophist* in 1934, equating the progressive ideals of Social Credit with those of theosophy. The first of these was called “The A.B.C. of Social Credit: A Series of Five Short Articles.”

William Rose, “The A.B.C. of Social Credit: A Series of Five Short Articles,” *The Canadian Theosophist*. Vol. XX No. 7 (Sept. 15, 1934): 200-201

It is important to note, however, that the Social Credit philosophy that was popular amongst Canadian theosophists was different from the Social Credit political movement that later established itself in British Columbia, decades after Brother XII’s disappearance from his Vancouver Island commune. In Leonard B. Kuffert, “Reckoning with the Machine: The British Columbia Social Credit Movement as Social Criticism, 1932-52.” *BC Studies*, iss. 124 (Winter 2000), 19, Kuffert notes that as a political movement in BC, Social Credit took on a populist rather than mystical guise, replacing the “scientific” Social Credit system of monetary reform with an emphasis on individualism, Christianity, and free enterprise. Therefore, Brother XII’s embrace of both mystical language and a race-focused political discourse should be compared to other manifestations of the Social Credit philosophy that did not appear in British Columbia. Equally, Brother XII’s interest in this race-focused political discourse does not elucidate anything about the later political history of British Columbia.

¹⁴⁶ Webb, *The Theosophical Establishment*, 87. In 1925, Hargrave transformed the Kibbo Kift into a vehicle for promoting the principles of Social Credit.

politically-charged writings are filled with anti-Semitic rhetoric.¹⁴⁷ Therefore, Wilson's racial political ideology was significant for being part of the wider political conversation of his era. Additionally, the combination of his occult preoccupations and his racist views reflected attitudes that circulated widely amongst theosophical supporters of Social Credit as well as among others of Wilson's reform-minded contemporaries; Wilson's ideas were not as aberrant as they might have appeared. Additionally, even if his views offended the contributors to the *Canadian Theosophist*, a Toronto-based publication, Wilson's preoccupation with race, although different in focus, echoed that of most white British Columbians. Indeed, Brother XII's anti-Semitism and antipathy toward Catholics, as well as his resolute defense of Anglo-Saxon Protestantism, concurred with the colonial tone of racial attitudes and prejudices that prevailed in British Columbia.

A discourse on race, such as that engaged in by many white British Columbians, was equally connected to ideas about nation, both of which were also central to theosophical ideas. Indeed, the Theosophical Society's philosophy inherently encouraged the development of nationalist discourses.¹⁴⁸ According to the Canadian historian Michele Lacombe, theosophy offered "an outlet for a benign brand of nationalism,"¹⁴⁹ and in India, Australia and Ireland, as well as in Canada, the TS supported the creation of national movements.¹⁵⁰ For Blavatsky, America as a nation had great occult importance and when she died in 1891 she told her successors that "the racial melting-pot of America" would be especially important to the development of an ever-more enlightened class of humans, meaning that the American-born sixth root race would usher in the promised age of peace and universal brotherhood.¹⁵¹ For his part, Wilson's writings seemed to correspond with theosophy's larger ideal of nations unified in Brotherhood. He echoed Blavatsky's passionate belief in the great destiny of "America", and demonstrated a similar faith that it was to be the birthplace of a new race of spiritually advanced humans embodying the principles of Universal Brotherhood. But

¹⁴⁷ John L. Finlay, *Social Credit: The English Origins* (Montreal and London: McGill – Queen's University Press:1972), 150. Unlike Brother XII, John Hargrave eschewed anti-Semitism.

¹⁴⁸ Lacombe, 102. The fifth root-race developed in Christian Europe, while the sixth would develop in a post-Christian twentieth-century America.

¹⁴⁹ Lacombe 115.

¹⁵⁰ Roe, 297.

¹⁵¹ Lacombe, 102.

he also placed a more specific emphasis on the importance of British Columbia as a site of spiritual renewal, which further alienated the (Eastern) Canadian Theosophical establishment from his utopian project but, unbeknownst to them, also tied his outlook more closely to that of many British Columbians.

Canadian theosophists used Blavatsky's evolutionary theory of the seven great root-races and her theosophical version of continental American manifest destiny to glorify Canada as a special region of North America and to help to generate a unified national consciousness, which contributed greatly to a nascent nationalist movement in Canada. Between the years 1890 and 1940, Madame Blavatsky's teachings about American uniqueness seemed also to affirm Canada's special occult status and point to its own role in the future evolution of the human race.¹⁵² As a result, throughout the 1920s and 30s, the period during which Wilson's Aquarian Foundation flourished and then withered, theosophy was at the height of its popularity in Canada.¹⁵³ According to Michele Lacombe, Canadian theosophists' occult-inspired nationalism contributed to the development of a self-consciously Canadian art and intellectual culture. Indeed, for a country that was just emerging from a stage of colonial dependency, Canadian artists and writers, who along with academic intellectuals made up the majority of the membership of the TS in Canada,¹⁵⁴ found theosophical notions concerning racial and national evolution attractive because they allowed Canadian theosophists to envision their own culture and their own artistic and literary tradition, and at a major stage of their country's development. Yet, despite affirming Blavatsky's occult vision of North American continentalism in order to legitimize their nationalist cultural project in the first place, Canadian theosophists did not feel any contradiction between their loyalty to Canada and to North America as a whole thanks to what Lacombe calls "the fine print of theosophy,"¹⁵⁵ with its high tolerance for internal contradiction. Additionally, the explicitly non-political nature of Canadian theosophists' nationalist vision, which focused on Canada's potential to offer its artistic and intellectual creativity to the world, enabled

¹⁵² Lacombe, 104.

¹⁵³ Davis, 96. The first Canadian lodge was established in Toronto in 1891, and by 1920 the total number of Canadian theosophists was 962. According to Ann Davis, this under-represents the overall cultural and social influence of theosophists in Canada.

¹⁵⁴ Lacombe, "Theosophy and the Canadian Idealist Tradition," 103.

¹⁵⁵ Ibid., 104.

Canadian theosophists to envision Canada's destiny as a great nation without denying their allegiance to North America as a whole, or even to larger collectivities such as the Universal Brotherhood of Man.¹⁵⁶

Wilson saw things differently, however, and whereas Blavatsky identified America as the favored nation and Canadian theosophists placed Canada in this role, for Brother XII it was ultimately British Columbia itself that would serve as the "promised land." He did not express this initially, and at first Canadian theosophists cautiously endorsed his project. Indeed, in 1926 Wilson had professed that the Master's Work he was carrying out through his Aquarian Foundation would be established in North America, both in Canada and the United States, thereby echoing the familiar language of Blavatsky's doctrine of American racial and spiritual destiny.¹⁵⁷ He later changed his mind, however, and in a general letter addressed to his followers and dated January 15, 1927, he announced that the Center chosen for him by the Master, which was to be the cradle of the coming sixth sub-race, was going to be neither Mexico nor California, but Canada, and specifically Southern British Columbia. Furthermore, it would not only be the center of the present Work, but "THE center of spiritual energy and knowledge for the whole continent of North America – for the whole world in the not distant future."¹⁵⁸ On this point, Canadian theosophists turned against him, denouncing his ignorance of Canada as much as his fraudulence as an occult sage. Wilson had lost the support of the Canadian theosophical establishment because he had failed to understand the subtleties of Canadian theosophical nationalism with its equal emphasis on a continental North American identity and the Canadian nation in its structures and beliefs. His embrace of southern British Columbia as the unique locus of the evolving sixth root-race, and his claim to legitimacy as a spiritual leader therewith, did not make his vision any more compelling to them, either. Yet it reflected a similar impulse to that of many British Columbians who

¹⁵⁶Fred Housser, "Some Thoughts on Political Consciousness" *The Canadian Theosophist* Vol VIII no. 5 (Toronto July 15, 1927) 81-82. In this article, published on the 60th anniversary of Canada's Confederation in the July, 1927 edition of the *Canadian Theosophist*, Housser refers to Canada's special occult destiny rather than to nationalism in its broad, and especially political, sense, declaring that "national consciousness" does not equate "political consciousness," and celebrating instead Canada's potential to offer its artistic and intellectual creativity to the world.

¹⁵⁷ Ibid.

¹⁵⁸John Oliphant, "The Teachings of Brother XII," 199. This quote is reprinted in Oliphant's article from a General Letter written by Wilson, dated 15 January 1927 and reprinted in *The Aquarian Foundation*, 31.

experienced a sense of alienation, whether, as for members of the dominant society, it was from the political and social power structure in central Canada, or, as for marginalized non-White residents of the province, it was from the race-based hegemony that same dominant society imposed. Like many other residents of British Columbia, Brother XII chose increasingly to turn inward on his own immediate world and to make of it the center of the world, both material and spiritual, as a whole.

In conclusion, Canada's most westward province is a place that has often, if inadvertently, fostered a radical utopian experimentalism, and so it provided a suitable refuge for the excesses of an occult spiritual leader like Brother XII. This was a man who, after anointing British Columbia the foreordained site of worldwide spiritual refuge, took thousands of dollars from idealistic supporters who believed in his vision, seemingly to indulge his own sensual appetites and ego gratification at the expense of his followers' physical, mental and spiritual well being.¹⁵⁹ The principles that propelled his project in the first place issued from the progressive and radical ideals contained within theosophy and the occult tradition.¹⁶⁰ His modification of those ideals -- using language that offended Eastern Canadian theosophists and conventional British Columbians alike -- was carried out deliberately to express his own dream of a better world. Wilson's choice of British Columbia as the sanctuary that would contain this world may have been opportunistic, especially considering his prior mariner's knowledge of its isolated coastal geography and the suitability of its mild southern climate for agriculture. But, whether he knew it or not, in exhorting a group of world-weary spiritual idealists to retreat to the remote wilds of Vancouver Island, Wilson was re-articulating a well-worn pattern of intersecting spiritual and political utopianism projected onto community life in British Columbia. For Edward Arthur Wilson, as for many before and since, British Columbia had appeal as a place where anything seemed possible, and where people could seek the impossible.

In many ways, British Columbia has remained anomalous within Canada. Long identified as the most secular province, the place that a 1980 poll revealed as having the

¹⁵⁹ Brown, *All Possible Worlds*, 42. Several of the elderly colonists nearly died from the strain of their agricultural labours, and all feared power they believed that Wilson wielded over their spiritual density.

¹⁶⁰ Lacombe, 114. "Theosophists shared in the optimism which led to the formation of the League of Nations, an in the heady idealism which inspired many, in the 1920s and 30s, to outline utopian societies."

lowest church or synagogue attendance in Canada,¹⁶¹ British Columbians have often expressed a sense of separateness from the rest of the country, and especially from the Eastern Canadian establishment. Additionally, the varied geography of the province further isolated communities within it from one another, especially in the nineteenth century. Even into the twentieth century and during the interwar years of Wilson's reign as Brother XII, when Vancouver and Victoria offered a settled and socially conventional environment for much of British Columbia's population, isolated places that could accommodate utopian experiments remained. Indeed, the very identity of British Columbia, dubbed "Canada's Commune Country"¹⁶² in a 1970 *Maclean's* magazine article, has remained tied to its utopian tendencies. This means that this identity, which combines the good place (eutopos) and the no place (outopos) of utopia, ultimately confers on British Columbians a place of *nowhere-ness* that has no history and remains altogether elusive.

This lack of a clear identity is precisely what Justine Brown points to when she observes that "our ephemeral history seems to cover its own tracks at every step...The oblivion of local history is both a product of, and produces, the pervasive sense of BC as nowhere."¹⁶³ For Brother XII, the fluidity of the place he identified as the spiritual center of the world allowed him to see what Brown calls "an isolated nowhere-ness, [a] no-place [that] suddenly became the only place on earth,"¹⁶⁴ and it was this, above all else, that created in British Columbia an enabling context for Brother XII's particular kind of radical critique based in the occult tradition. At the same time, this critique itself had fluidity, and supported extremes of vision, such as an egalitarian ideal of gender equity and sexual freedom on one hand, and on the other, a proto-fascist, anti-Semitic diatribe that also expressed yearning for a better world. This in itself highlights the inadequacy of conventional labels, including those that divide right from left, conservative from progressive, as much as the rational from the irrational or the secular from the sacred.

The story of Brother XII has been refracted through a myriad of lenses and largely mythologized, and in examining how it has been perceived, we catch a glimpse of some

¹⁶¹ Daniel Francis, ed. *Encyclopedia of British Columbia* Madeira Park BC, 2000.

¹⁶² Alan Edmonds, "Canada's Commune Country," *Maclean's* August 1970, 42.

¹⁶³ Brown, *All Possible Worlds*, 10.

¹⁶⁴ Brown, *All Possible World*, 38.

of the competing visions of British Columbia. Next to its staid depiction of British Columbia as a respectable, civilized place like any other, the province's popular press has also contributed many colourful descriptions of British Columbia's "commune country" as a mysterious and sometimes sinister place. In the Fall 1991 issue of *BC Bookworld*, literary critic George Woodcock referred to BC as a place "scattered with collective ghosts,"¹⁶⁵ and Pierre Berton's 1975 appraisal of the Aquarian Foundation dubbed it an "off-beat religion" next to which no others are quite so "kooky, bizarre or preposterous...or so downright evil."¹⁶⁶ There have been many other articles written about the Brother XII experiment, fuelled by the double appeal of his scandalous reign and mysterious disappearance, and most have commingled notions of fantasy, secrecy, menace and failure, featuring titles such as: "Weird occultism exemplified in Amazing colony at Cedar-by-Sea;"¹⁶⁷ "Black Magic Gold and Guns Feature Strange Cult Case;"¹⁶⁸ and "Amazing Failure of UTOPIA": Brother XII Sued by his Followers."¹⁶⁹ In each, proof of Brother XII's power and exploits has been ever-more exaggerated, from the number of his followers to the number of chests of gold coins he stashed away, to the number of his sexual conquests.¹⁷⁰ Even today, popular interest in the Brother XII story has remained strong, to judge from a recent article in the *National Post*¹⁷¹ and a new book about Brother XII's infamous final mistress by BC author Pearl Luke.¹⁷² In telling and re-telling the story of Brother XII, both the proponents of his romantic vision and detractors of its failed execution contribute to the ever-unfolding story of British

¹⁶⁵ George Woodcock, "Brother Twelve: Master of the Universe," *BC Bookworld* Fall 1991, 14.

¹⁶⁶ Pierre Burton. "The Devil of DeCourcy Island" in *Mysterious Canada: Strange sights, Extraordinary Events and Peculiar Places*, ed. John Robert. (Colombo. Toronto: Doubleday Canada, 1988), 148.

¹⁶⁷ Bruce McKelvie, *Vancouver Daily Province*, 28 October, 1928, 1.

¹⁶⁸ *The Daily Colonist*, 28 April, 1933.

¹⁶⁹ *The Vancouver Sun*, 7 November, 1932.

¹⁷⁰ This number is quoted as reaching between 2,000 and 20,000, depending on the source. In the articles that Bruce McKelvie wrote in the Vancouver Province newspaper in 1928, he noted that there were roughly 2,000 members, both resident and internationally, of the Aquarian Foundation. Five years later, in 1933, another newspaper report in that same paper had inflated that number to 8,000 members, and by 1956, when Gwen Cash wrote her Daily Colonist article (February 26, 1956 "Bridey Murphy Case Recalls Brother XII," 2), she reported the membership of the Aquarian Foundation to have reached 20,000.

¹⁷¹ "Oh Brother XII, Where art thou," *National Post*, 29 November, 2001.

¹⁷² Pearl Luke, *Madame Zee*. (Toronto: Harper Collins Canada Ltd., 2006). The book offers a fictional account of the life of Wilson's notorious consort.

Columbia itself, where limitless possibilities and sobering realities abut and where utopian dreams both flourish and founder.

To understand why the myth of Brother XII endures, it is useful to glimpse the appeal he had to his contemporaries. The larger historical context of the Brother XII story, and the period of his operation in British Columbia from 1927-1933, was a time of uncertainty in the world, where extremes of thought were commonplace and people sought answers in both political and spiritual organizations, from Social Credit and Fascism to Theosophy and Brother XII's "doomsday philosophy"¹⁷³ and millenarian message. The theosophical establishment in Canada - and particularly Eastern Canada - may have rejected Brother XII, and the newspapers may have ridiculed him, but his community endured until 1933, and despite his failings as a leader, there are many reasons why his followers came and remained with him. He drew them with his personal charm and charisma; with his profession of ideals of brotherly love and other values appealing to the pre-1914 generation, which made up the bulk of his followers; and because he supported the "conservative" wing of the Theosophical Society and attracted disaffected theosophists who preferred his embrace of traditional theosophy. Thus, between his capacity to catalyze the anxieties and aspirations common to people of the inter-war era and the mythic proportions of his exploits in a place that constantly creates its own mythology, Brother XII has remained an archetypical figure in BC history, and one whose example as a charismatic cult leader resonates in other communities and in other community leaders, such as Lord Martin Exeter and Ted Sideras.¹⁷⁴

Indeed, today there are still esoteric millenarian apocalyptic reform movements in North America whose ideals and trajectory are similar to those of Brother XII. Two of these are Elizabeth Clare Prophet's Church Universal and Triumphant and the Heaven's Gate movement.¹⁷⁵ Both were established in the mid-1970s and drew from theosophy, among other spiritual traditions, to create their apocalyptic philosophy. Of

¹⁷³ Justine Brown, *All Possible Worlds*, 38.

¹⁷⁴ Brown, *All Possible Worlds*, 43. Ted Sideras ran a commune on Lasqueti Island from 1967-71, and received considerable positive press coverage until scandal broke and he decamped to Fiji. Lord Martin Exeter, founder of the Emissaries of Divine Light, built a religious community at 100 Mile House that still exists, though with considerably depleted numbers of adherents.

¹⁷⁵ The Religious Movements Homepage Project at the University of Virginia, <<http://religiousmovements.lib.virginia.edu/>> (17 September, 2006).

the two, Clare Prophet's group has endured, despite her fervent belief that the US would be destroyed in a Soviet missile strike in April 1990, while the Heaven's Gate community, after seeking alien intervention to foster human evolutionary progress, committed mass suicide in San Diego, California in March, 1997, the implosion of yet another utopian community. For most people today, groups like Heaven's Gate and the Church Universal and Triumphant sound too strange to be taken seriously as a spiritual alternative. But Jill Roe, in her history of theosophy in Australia, reminds us that before the Great Depression, there was a tremendous shared hope for a comprehensive spiritual reconstruction, what she calls "the forgotten feel of the New Age."¹⁷⁶ And in exploring the hypnotic spell Brother XII seemed able to cast over his hapless followers, James Santucci concludes that the story of the Aquarian Foundation and its remarkable endurance shows "the power that the myths of the New Age hold over people."¹⁷⁷ Finally, in his history of the New Age, Paul Heelas argues that periods of rapid social change and uncertainty, where people experience "a dissonance between observed reality and the beliefs and values of their culture and the established religions,"¹⁷⁸ provoke a renewed interest in mysticism and other non-conventional religious practices. If that is so, then the change and uncertainty that accompanied both the fin-de-siècle occult revival and the second occult revival in the inter-war period render the occult or New Age, including Brother XII and the alternative social and spiritual model his particular philosophy proposed, a central feature of modernity.

¹⁷⁶ Roe, 313.

¹⁷⁷ Santucci, 56.

¹⁷⁸ Paul Heelas, *The New Age Movement* (Cambridge: Blackwell Publishers, 1996), 149.

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